Blue Velvet: a parable of male development

LYNNE LAYTON

Blue Velvet (David Lynch, 1986) has stirred up a number of critical controversies relevant to feminist film criticism: is the film paradigmatic of postmodernism or stuck in the crudest of binaries? If it is postmodern, what version of postmodernism does it proffer – the one that decentres what Kaja Silverman has called the 'dominant fiction' of phallic wholeness?[1] Or the one that is the psychological and moral equivalent of contemporary capitalist relations of production, the one that Jane Shattuc calls the new patriarchal dominant of commercial postmodernism? Does the film's style deconstruct the narrative's logic or mime it? Is the film an enactment of an Oedipal scenario?[2] Or is Shattuc right to argue that Freudian categories are incapable of describing what goes on psychologically in the film?[3]

The analyses occasioned by *Blue Velvet*'s stylistic and content confusions reveal some of the contradictions in the critical vocabularies of contemporary film theory and psychoanalytic theory. As feminist film theory ponders male development, and psychoanalytic theory deconstructs the drives and the Oedipal story, *Blue Velvet* seems again to be a film worth looking at. For *Blue Velvet* offers a view of male development that sheds light on the interplay between Oedipal and pre-Oedipal fantasies and fixations in our particular historical moment, and thus sheds light on contemporary gender relations. Before turning to Lynch's parable of male development, I would like to look at recent figurations of the pre-Oedipal in feminist film theory and in contemporary psychoanalytic theory.

1 Lynda K. Bundtzen, '"Don't look at me!": woman's body, woman's voice in *Blue Velvet*, *Western Humanities Review*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1988), pp. 187–203; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jane M. Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny in *Blue Velvet*', *Genders*, no. 13 (1992), pp. 73–89.

2 Most critics who discuss the film use Freudian categories, such as the Oedipus complex, the primal scene, Frank as representing the forces of the id. See, for example, Tracy Biga, '*Blue Velvet*', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1987), pp. 44–9; Bundtzen, '"Don't look at me!"'; James F. Maxfield, '"Now it's dark": the child's dream in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*', *Post Script*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1989), pp. 2–17.

3 Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 78. Others argue that the film makes neither psychological nor narrative sense. See, for example, John Simon, 'Neat trick', *National Review*, 7 November 1986, pp. 54, 56; and C. Kenneth Pellow, '*Blue Velvet* once more', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1990), pp. 173–8.

Feminist film criticism has moved from Laura Mulvey's focus on the way film works to enable a male spectator to secure his sense of solidity and dominance to a focus on what the editors of *Camera Obscura* recently called 'male trouble'.[4] The shift here is in part a move from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal dynamics. Male trouble includes those aspects of male development that challenge the reign of the Phallus and the masculine and feminine positions it prescribes (for example, see Parveen Adams's discussion of the male's pre-Oedipal oscillation in gender identifications; and Kaja Silverman's notion of imaginary vs symbolic identifications). In Adams's and Silverman's work (as well as in Paul Smith's 'Vas'[5]), the pre-Oedipal is figured as resistant to the phallic 'dominant fiction' and thus is seen as subversive (in the same way that hysteria has been seen as a subversive protest against dominant versions of femininity). While these critics challenge the supremacy of the Oedipus complex, they nonetheless remain confined within Freudian categories, interpreting, as Freud does, the pre-Oedipal backwards from the vantage point of what is supposed to happen in the Oedipus. Thus, they allow Freud's 'story' of male and female development to obscure other possible developmental scenarios. As DiPiero argues in his response to these articles, there is a problem in granting such legitimacy to Freud's story. If you posit castration and sexual difference as the central organizers of culture, you cannot escape hegemonic masculinity, even if you envision a pre-Oedipal realm that works in opposition to the Oedipal: the exception merely proves the rule.[6]

Gaylyn Studlar is one of the few film critics to have let pre-Oedipal categories stand on their own terms; Kaja Silverman dismisses Studlar's work in one footnote as biological and apolitical, claiming that to focus an argument solely at the level of the pre-Oedipal is to participate in a disavowal of the Law, the Law that performs a second fragmentation on a subject already fragmented by nature.[7] Silverman's criticism assumes a view of the pre-Oedipal mother as a phallic mother, which presupposes that what is disavowed at the pre-Oedipal level is castration, the actuality of fragmentation. But this fantasy of a phallic mother also reads development backwards from the Oedipal: indeed, the phallic mother is a phallic fantasy every bit as violent towards women as its complement, the view that women are deficient.

The question, however, is: where do these binary fantasies come from? Several analysts have offered pre-Oedipal interpretations that go beyond a Freudian framework. Chasseguet-Smirgel, for example, has argued that the pre-Oedipal mother's power comes from the child's dependence on her. The child experiences such helpless dependency as a narcissistic wound and defensively flees it, with boys and girls showing different defensive styles. In such a view, the fantasy of merging with a phallic mother would be interpreted not as

4 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18; *Camera Obscura*, special issue titled 'Male Trouble', no. 17 (1988).

5 Parveen Adams, 'Per os(cillation)', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 7–29; Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 31–66; Paul Smith, 'Vas', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 89–111.

6 Thomas DiPiero, 'The patriarch is not (just) a man', *Camera Obscura*, nos. 25–6 (1991), pp. 101–24.

7 Gaylyn Studlar, 'Masochism and the perverse pleasures of the cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Volume II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 602–21; Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity', p. 66, footnote 51.

a stage of development but as one of many defences against dependency.[8] Dependency is, in fact, a category which Freud's rhetoric consistently evades: the resulting theoretical nonsequiturs betray his discomfort. Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that Oedipal theory and the 'sexual phallic monism' at the core of Freud's theory of male and female development are, in part, defensive strategies to manage the power of the mother and the state of helpless dependency. Freudian theory tends to cover over dependency by eroticizing it (making what is pre-Oedipal look Oedipal): a fairly typical male defence against experiencing dependency. As Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin have shown, the fact that women are responsible for child care, and thus become culturally associated with dependency and nurturance, makes the pre-Oedipal every bit as political as the Oedipal. Indeed, that fact determines the nature of both the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal, the nature of the phallic law.[9]

Studlar's work, too, accepts an Oedipal/pre-Oedipal binary and tends to dehistoricize development. In opposition to Mulvey's view of a sadistic, voyeuristic cinematic apparatus, Studlar offers a masochistic aesthetic that, for example, reinterprets the mother as complete rather than lacking, and the fetish as a transitional object promoting self-cohesion rather than a stand-in for the missing phallus. While Studlar's work, and Silverman's earlier work on the pleasures of passivity,[10] are important challenges to Mulvey, each errs in trying to fix one aesthetic by which film operates (and one psychology by which spectators operate). What I will argue here is that films such as *Blue Velvet* (and most of Lynch's other films) enact both the masochistic and the sadistic dynamics put forward by Mulvey and Studlar, but that the best way to understand these dynamics is by starting with male trouble on the pre-Oedipal level, working forward to male trouble on the Oedipal level, and historicizing both of them. The fantasy of symbiosis with the complete mother is but the flip side of the competitive rivalry with the father and its resultant heroic isolation: neither is subversive. Jeffrey Beaumont, the hero of *Blue Velvet*, seeks knowledge of things that he knows are there but have always been hidden. The big secrets in such male discourse are male dependency, desire for the pre-Oedipal, nurturant father, and female agency; and *Blue Velvet* enacts the struggle between keeping and breaking the secrets.[11]

Ironically, although psychoanalytic feminist film criticism in both its mid 1970s and current forms works almost exclusively within Freudian and Lacanian categories (an interesting exercise would be to count the number of exegeses of 'A child is being beaten' in feminist film criticism), Anglo-American psychoanalysts in the same period have moved further and further away from the drives and the

8 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, 'Freud and female sexuality: the consideration of some blind spots in the exploration of the "Dark Continent"', in *Sexuality and Mind: The Role of the Father and the Mother in the Psyche* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 9–28. See also Madelon Sprengnether's discussion of Freud's defensive theorizing of the Oedipus complex, 'Anticipating Oedipus', in *The Spectral Mother* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 13–21.

9 Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

10 Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and subjectivity', *Framework*, no. 12 (1980), pp. 2–9.

11 The secret of male dependence is dealt with in interesting ways in many genres that one might consider male, such as classic hard-boiled detective fiction, male buddy films (especially the subgenre that centres on unwilling buddies), heavy metal. Connection and recognition between men are central, but connection often occurs almost on the sly. See David Leverenz for an important study of male–male relations in popular culture, 'The last real man in America: from Natty Bumppo to Batman', *American Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1991), pp. 753–81.

privileging of Oedipus. While some may criticize this move as a retreat from the political or from Freudian radicalism, I would argue the opposite. Certainly contemporary analytic schools – such as self-psychology, object relations, the intersubjective and the relational school – have not, in abandoning drive theory, abandoned such notions as the dynamic unconscious and the repetition compulsion. And contemporary analytic theory is much more focused on actual interactions between caretakers and infants, and so is less vulnerable to criticisms of ahistoricity and universalism than are Freud and Lacan – and perhaps less vulnerable to phallic fantasies as well.

Since the 1970s, the focus of analytic theory has been the cohesion of the self (considered good) and threats to such cohesion (considered bad, which makes this theory antithetical to that of Lacan). Heinz Kohut's work on narcissistic disorders and Otto Kernberg's work on both borderline and narcissistic states shifted analytic attention from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal dynamics.[12] Just as postmodern discourse began to celebrate the foundational fragmentation of the self, analytic discourse began to lament the frequency with which clients suffered not from Oedipal guilt but from fragmentation that had its roots in pre-Oedipal trauma.

12 Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International University Press, 1971); *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International University Press, 1977); Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1975); *Internal World and External Reality* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1985).

Central both to analytic discourse about self-disorders and to discourse about trauma is the notion of splitting. People with self-disorders, as well as trauma victims (and the correlations are apparently high between diagnoses of borderline personality disorder and abuse histories) are fragmented in particular ways: they tend to split the world affectively, cognitively, and relationally into all good and all bad representations that remain entirely separate. While splitting is a normal defence of early childhood (keeping separate the good and the bad breast/mother), in the best of outcomes one becomes able to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence about the self, others, the world. In the worst of outcomes, everything remains split and the subject never fully differentiates self from other. This worst case scenario might occur when the world on which the subject depends has been consistently unreliable or harshly aggressive.

Jessica Benjamin has posited another origin of narcissistic disorder, one more normative in the culture. In *The Bonds of Love*, she draws on the findings of those who observe infant–parent interactions and uncovers within these interactions a dialectic of assertion and recognition, a desire to be recognized as a subject by another subject, who in turn is recognized as a related but separate centre of initiative. Benjamin sees the roots of the breakdown of this dialectic of mutuality in the pre-Oedipal rapprochement subphase of development, which is where Kernberg places the origin of borderline and narcissistic disorder. One of Benjamin's many contributions is to attribute the breakdown in part to gender inequalities: the mother's primacy in the caretaking of children, the

father's intermittent presence and, particularly, to both psychoanalytic theory's and the culture's refusal to grant agency to the mother. The master–slave, subject–object, doer–done to structure of western philosophy and life is the outcome of the breakdown of mutuality that occurs in the pre-Oedipal phase of development. In Benjamin's theory, men become subjects not fully differentiated from mother, eternally stuck in a recurrent battle to turn the other into an object, yet longing for recognition from a subject both like and different.[13]

13 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, especially chapters 1 and 2, pp. 11–84.

Thus, in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, pre-Oedipal problems are disorders of attachment, disorders of dependency and trust, as well as disorders of self – and gender identifications are major constituents of how these disorders are expressed. As theoretical and cultural representations less and less frequently show the capacity to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity, one begins to fear that narcissistic, schizoid and borderline dynamics, while far from normal, may well be the norm. Christopher Lasch was perhaps right both to identify a culture of narcissism, and in his view that the modal figure/logic of contemporary life is not the schizophrenic, as Jameson and others have argued, but the narcissist and the traumatized/traumatizer.[14] Thus, the pre-Oedipal, as we live it culturally and represent it in film, is not at all necessarily subversive of the Oedipal. Rather, what people call the Oedipal – the disidentification with mother and with all things culturally coded feminine; rivalry with the father – may be no more than the further evolution of pre-Oedipal failures.

14 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and consumer society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 111–25.

This brings me to David Lynch and *Blue Velvet*. While the 'secret' is one of Lynch's favourite tropes, it is by now no secret that abuse and the abuse victim are central to his aesthetic (and indeed central to much postmodern art). From one of his earliest films, *The Grandmother* (1970), in which a boy abused by his parents grows a benevolent grandmother from seeds, to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), in which Laura Palmer discovers that her longtime secret abuser is her father, David Lynch has consistently chronicled the horrors of social and family life: in Lynch's world, parents are completely unreliable, if not abusive. And it is important to note that his victims are not always female and his perpetrators not always male: the Elephant Man (*The Elephant Man* [1980]), for example, is abused by his 'owner' and, Lynch suggests, by his more benevolent medical patron; the mother in *Wild at Heart* (1990) is the abuser.

But in *Blue Velvet*, Lynch offers a psychology of the abuser/abused and a psychology of male development that begin to map a patriarchal dominant marked by the kind of pre-Oedipal defences characteristic of narcissistic and borderline personality disorders: splitting and fragmentation, primitive idealization, projection,

denial, omnipotence and devaluation, identity diffusion (including gender identity), and rage about dependency. In Lynch's world, and in our own perhaps, the particular Oedipal resolutions that follow are two: the lobotomized Mr Happy Face; and his flip side, the rageful, violent but impotent sociopath.

Much of the early criticism of *Blue Velvet* noted Lynch's dichotomous world view. Critics spoke of a 'startling mixture of naivete and kinkiness', 'candy sweet scenes of picture postcard America' against 'scenes of horrific sexual violence';[15] and of the stark contrast between Frank's obscene language and Sandy's syrupy sentimentality. While some applauded the disjunction between Sandy's world of robins and love and Frank's dark world of sadomasochism (largely those who saw the sentimentality as ironic commentary on the more real darkness), others called Lynch and his film immature, a vision with no middle ground.[16] Interviews, as well as Lynch's other films, bear out the conviction that Lynch sees the world as split between innocence and naivete vs sickness and horror;[17] or, in Karen Jaehne's film history terms, between Frank Capra and film noir.[18] In *Eraserhead* (1977), Henry, the beleaguered father of the deformed, controlling infant he finally kills, unites with The Lady in the Radiator, who sings that in heaven, everything is fine. Laura Palmer, in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, unites with Agent Cooper and meets the angel she had to erase from the picture on her bedroom wall once she realized her abuser was her father. Sailor and Lula, in *Wild at Heart*, find a space safe from Lula's wicked witch mother and nightmare flashbacks of abuse, Sailor's lack of 'parental guidance'. And the Elephant Man holds fast to the pictures of his benevolent mother and his benefactress after a life of abuse from his 'owner', the rabble, and medical science. Do Lynch's films overcome these splits? Do they reveal splitting as a mechanism arising from the problems he explores? Or does he formally enact the splitting that is at the centre of the content of his films?

Feminist film criticism has always focused on the endemic splitting enacted against women in Hollywood films. Women who write about *Blue Velvet* have been most concerned with the way Lynch treats women in the film and have disagreed about the function of Lynch's propensity towards splitting. Early reviews on Lynch and women were critical, although Tracy Biga—working from relational feminist theory and from E. Ann Kaplan's question, do women want to possess the gaze? argues tentatively that Sandy represents an alternative gaze of affirmation and affiliation.[19] Linda Bundtzen's 'Don't look at me! woman's body, woman's voice in *Blue Velvet*' is one of the few articles that tries to rescue Lynch from charges of misogyny. She performs this feat by suggesting that Lynch's postmodern style subverts the classic relations of looking embodied in the film. Her sense is that while one could easily see the film through the lens of Mulvey's theory, Lynch takes away the viewer's

15 David Ansen, 'Stranger than paradise: Lynch's nightmare tour of homespun America', *Newsweek*, 15 September 1986, p. 69; Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 73.

16 See Karen Jaehne, '*Blue Velvet*', *Cineaste*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1987), pp. 38–41; John Powers, 'Bleak chic', *American Film*, vol. 12, no. 5 (1987), pp. 46–51.

17 Lynch says in an interview with David Chute, 'This is all the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naive quality to my life, and there's a horror and a sickness as well', cited in Betsy Berry, 'Forever, in my dreams: generic conventions and the subversive imagination in *Blue Velvet*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1988), p. 82.

18 Jaehne, '*Blue Velvet*', p. 38. Lynch's split world is discussed in Bundtzen, ' "Don't look at me!" '; Powers, 'Bleak chic'; Pellow, '*Blue Velvet* once more'; Maxfield, ' "Now it's dark" '; Berry, 'Forever, in my dreams'.

19 Tracy Biga, '*Blue Velvet*', pp. 44–9; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Is the gaze male?', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 309–27.

pleasure in looking at Dorothy by filming her naked body in nonerotic ways and by making the viewer feel the hero's shame at looking, his shame at expressing his sadistic impulses on the female body. She argues that Dorothy remains a mystery through to the end, which 'undermines an audience's confidence in Lynch's image and frustrates its desire to know and understand his world'.[20] Bundtzen interprets the final scene, in which Dorothy embraces her son, Donny, in a sunlit park, as evidence that Dorothy escapes the representations imposed upon her. She writes:

20 Bundtzen, '"Don't look at me!"', p. 192.

> Underneath, Dorothy is maternal plenitude, the good mother, a figure of love and care, and all of her representations are fantasies imposed on the maternal to enact childish aggressions toward her. In this, Lynch as director plays a role for his audience like the one Frank claims in relation to Jeffrey: he is 'A candy-colored clown they call the Sandman' and Blue Velvet is his dream of total possession of the mother: 'In dreams you're mine, all of the time.' Lynch presents a waking dream, however, forcing us to see the cloying 'candy-colored' nature of his illusion, and the result is a nightmare like Jeffrey's where the mother is shamefully cannibalized . . .'.[21]

21 Ibid.

Indeed, the film's final image evokes Dorothy with the object of her desire, her son. But has Dorothy here escaped a male representational economy? Whose fantasy is the fantasy of maternal plenitude? And why do so few critics note how deeply woven together are violence and impotence in this film? To answer these questions, one needs to go beyond Freudian categories.

While less certain than Bundtzen that the film's style subverts its message, I agree wholeheartedly that the dream at the centre of the film is one of total possession of the mother. But here, as elsewhere in male popular culture, the emotional intensity of the film seems less focused on women, or on the relationship between women and men, than on men and their relations with each other. As Bundtzen's title suggests, 'Don't look at me!', which Frank yells repeatedly at Dorothy, is precisely the emotional point: it literalizes the breakdown in male–female mutuality of which Benjamin's intersubjective theory speaks. What Bundtzen does not comment upon, however, is the moment when the injunction reverses to 'Look at me!' Frank speaks this to Jeffrey at the climax of Jeffrey's initiation rite into manhood, the scene where Frank 'fucks with' Jeffrey. How and why does this shift from female to male centrality occur?

The film suggests that the mother's gaze stirs reminders of dependency and reminders that the mother has agency and thus can leave (indeed, Frank kidnaps Dorothy's son, which makes Donny the victim of maternal abandonment). So the dream must strip woman of her capacity to desire. Yet, the only woman who could

fulfil Frank's desire is the one who wants him all the time, the one whose desire is focused solely on him. If he desires her, but her desire is not solely for him, his dependency and fear of abandonment are revealed. To avoid revelation of this secret – female agency and male dependence – woman's desire is rendered irrelevant, dependency is projected onto her, and what is left is a world that tries to function solely around the various looks between men. But the castration of female agency leaves the men violent and impotent, desperately searching for *something* from each other, but not knowing what. Lynch dramatizes this primal scene of our culture by making his film a parable of male development, a parable in which one grows from power as a male baby, rid of the father and in possession of the mother, to impotence as a man.

In the first scenes of *Blue Velvet*, an elderly man suffers a stroke while watering his suburban lawn. We next see him in hospital, hooked up to machines and weeping because he cannot speak to his son, Jeffrey Beaumont, the film's protagonist. On his way home from the hospital, Jeffrey finds an ear in a field and takes it to the police station. Detective Williams, father of Jeffrey's love interest to be, Sandy, warns Jeffrey away from the dangers of life. But he cannot solve the crime, indeed does not even know that one of his top men is involved in the crime. The benevolent town fathers are impotent: Jeffrey cannot depend on them to protect him or to reveal to him the secrets of life. The first lesson of Oedipal masculinity is that fathers cannot help you become a man: what you do, you must do alone (even though Sandy offers help, her attempts never quite work out). The film suggests, however, that once you are a man, you are useless.

Jeffrey is investigating the mystery of the severed ear, the mystery of the castrated, impotent father. His investigation leads to Dorothy, the enigmatic woman; but the mission is to discover the mystery of masculinity. The film begins with the mention of losses and underscores the hero's isolation: Jeffrey has not only lost a connection to his father, but his mother barely looks up from the television when he enters a room, and he mournfully tells Sandy that all his friends are gone from the town.

Those critics who see the film as an Oedipal drama argue that Frank and Dorothy become Jeffrey's surrogate parents – Dorothy initiating Jeffrey into sexuality, Frank teaching him what beer to drink and how to be polite on the family trip to Pussy Heaven, the pivotal scene of the film.[22] Dorothy and Frank, totally unpredictable parents, make Jeffrey aware of the drives, of sex and aggression, and finally lead him to accept, with his new self-knowledge, the Law of civilization. Indeed, critics also see Lynch's film as a kind of 'Civilization and its Discontents', in which Frank represents the id, sex and aggression, lying just beneath a surface of civilization.

22 See, for example, Maxfield, '"Now it's dark"', p. 2; Biga, 'Blue Velvet', p. 46

Lynch's camera, however, focuses as frequently on signifiers of Frank's impotence as on signifiers of his power, subverting any easy equation of Frank with the id and returning us to the pre-Oedipal and to male trouble.

On his second trip to Dorothy's apartment, Jeffrey searches each of her rooms, but the camera singles out and pauses in closeup on only one object, a child's hat. Hiding behind the closet, Jeffrey hears Dorothy talking on the telephone, asking Don (her husband) if little Donny is all right. The camera comes close up to Dorothy as she says, 'Mummy loves you'. The object of Dorothy's desire is revealed to be her kidnapped son (although it is unclear if it is Donny or 'baby' Frank on the line; Frank, indeed, longs to take the place of her baby). Jeffrey later tells Sandy that Dorothy wants to die, that Frank has kidnapped her son and husband as bait to keep her alive. When she hangs up, Dorothy reaches under the couch and looks at a hidden picture: Jeffrey's last act before leaving the apartment is to look at the picture, which is of Don and Donny (in his hat), and then at the marriage certificate behind it. 'Oh my God, the hat', he says. 'She's married. Don.' Solving the mystery would appear to have something to do with tracking the sources of Dorothy's desire.

In the next scene, Dorothy discovers Jeffrey in the closet and simultaneously humiliates and stimulates him. In this scene, too, when Dorothy calls Jeffrey 'Don', we get a clue that Dorothy's desire is elsewhere. Then Frank enters. Jeffrey's first (and last) view of Frank is from Dorothy's closet and what he sees is no primal scene but a scene shot through with the cultural dynamics of pre-Oedipally fixated male–female relationships. Bundtzen well describes the infantile aggression played out against the mother as Frank calls himself alternately baby and daddy, smacks Dorothy if she looks at him, and puts the blue velvet into his mouth and hers, simulating, as Bundtzen notes, an umbilical cord. But then Bundtzen calls the velvet a fetish, a code word in feminist film criticism which immediately returns the theorist to the Freudian categories that deny dependence on the mother in order to establish male dominance. In the Freudian framework, the fetish stands in for the penis. What happened to the umbilical cord (also a key image in *Eraserhead*)?

For twenty years psychoanalytic theorists have been questioning the phallic interpretation of the fetish, arguing instead that fetishes are used to self-soothe, to replace dependency on an outside source of soothing and nurturance so that the subject does not fragment when the soothing other is absent (in Kohut's terms, a selfobject).[23] While a few critics have noted that Frank has enormous trouble getting it up, it is odd that few have made his impotence central to their interpretation of the film. Frank needs drugs, alcohol, the right atmosphere, a fist, the blue velvet selfobject, and the banning of his

23 See, for example, Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey, 'Transvestism: new perspectives', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1978), pp. 301–23.

24 Bundtzen, '"Don't look at me!"', p. 193.

partner's gaze to be able even briefly to have intercourse ('impersonating male orgasm', as Bundtzen well puts it).[24] It is no accident that Frank wants Ben to toast not his health, but his fuck; because, although 'fuck' is every other word out of his mouth, the word represents precisely what he has so much difficulty doing.

Lynch plays hide and seek with revealing the nature and source of Frank's impotence and rage. The key to interpretation, I think, lies in the film's central songs, 'Blue Velvet' and 'In Dreams'. The mystery begins to unravel in the film's climactic scene at Pussy Heaven. Although 'Pussy Heaven' suggests a world of girls, girls, girls, all we actually find at Pussy Heaven are relations between men. The film answers the riddle of how to be a man via such things as beer preferences: Jeffrey likes Heineken, Sandy's father drinks Budweiser, the king of beers, and Frank will allow Jeffrey to drink nothing but Pabst Blue Ribbon. Frank's men continuously circle and gaze at Jeffrey, teasing him and threatening him with a knife; and Frank himself only has eyes for Ben, who later sings him a song of love and loss. Frank's homosexual desire is clearly one of the mysteries that Jeffrey always knew were there but which had remained hidden. Both Frank and Ben 'nurture' Jeffrey with physical violence: Frank proudly tells Ben he can make Jeffrey do whatever he wants.

At Pussy Heaven, Frank holds in his hand another of his fetish/selfobjects, the tape of Roy Orbison's 'In Dreams'. He allows Dorothy to visit her son ('Let tits see her kid'); she lights up, and, with the camera on the closed door, we hear her try to reassure Donny that mummy loves him, which is the perfect introduction to 'In Dreams'. Frank puts on the tape and Ben, 'one suave fucker', lipsyncs. The camera focuses on Frank's face, and we see what we saw through Jeffrey's eyes when Dorothy sang 'Blue Velvet' in the Slow Club: a rapt expression of vulnerable longing. Here, Frank gazes beyond Ben as he gazed beyond Dorothy in the Slow Club: his desire, in both scenes, is for something in the lyrics. In both songs, there is a golden moment, a moment of plenitude in which the singer possesses someone entirely. In 'Blue Velvet', that moment was in the past. In 'In Dreams', the moment is ushered in by a man, the sandman, a good father who gives reassurance that everything is going to be all right. This moment, repeated every night, is a moment when the singer has a nurturant father and is the sole object of his love's desire; but it is a moment that does not last. In the middle of Orbison's song, Frank's look changes to one of disturbance, pain, and then, finally, to rage, at which point he switches off the tape and yells that it is time to go for a joyride. The interpretation of the film, of Lynch's view of male development, hinges on how one interprets that rage; one can only make that interpretation after hearing the song for the second time.

When he clicks off 'In Dreams', unable to tolerate its ending,

Frank begins to yell, 'Let's fuck. I'll fuck anything that moves'. He tries to make his pain disappear by eroticizing it. The next scene, Jeffrey's final rite of initiation into masculinity, reveals the way in which Oedipal and pre-Oedipal damage are interwoven. Frank herds everyone into the car for a ride. At their destination, he uses his inhaler and begins to paw at Dorothy's breasts ('Baby wants to pinch them'). Frank has identified Jeffrey as like him, as having the same psychic structure. Jeffrey tells him not to touch Dorothy and hits him; now Frank's rage is fuelled by jealousy: in a common reversal of Freud's version of the Oedipal story, the father discovers that the son has the power, and becomes violent towards the son (which is in fact the original story of Oedipus, a story in which fathers are not nurturers, but hostile rivals).

Frank has Jeffrey removed from the car and has his men prepare him for the rite to follow. Then Frank smears his own mouth with lipstick, inhales, calls Jeffrey 'pretty, pretty', and kisses him. He asks to have 'Candy Colored Clown' played, and the tape begins. As the song starts, with its father–son bedtime reassurances that everything will be all right, Frank tells Jeffrey he is fucking lucky to be alive. At that moment, he commands Jeffrey to look at him. This is a marked moment because he has so many times become infuriated when Dorothy, and once when Jeffrey, has looked at him. With Jeffrey's gaze on him, he gives Jeffrey the Oedipal lecture: stay away from Dorothy. Frank yells that if Jeffrey doesn't leave her alone, he'll send him a love letter. 'Do you know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a fucking gun. You receive a love letter from me you're fucked forever.' Then Frank speaks the lines of the song's moment of plenitude to Jeffrey: 'In dreams, I walk with you. In dreams I talk to you. In dreams you're mine, all . . . (he stops). . . . Forever, in dreams.' Frank then gently wipes the lipstick from Jeffrey's mouth with the blue velvet, for a moment a nurturant father. But as the song turns to the part that Frank had switched off, we finally discover the source of Frank's rage. As the song intones, 'I awake to find you gone', Frank turns violent. He tells Jeffrey to feel his muscles and asks if he likes it, marking the shift from nurturant to phallic masculinity (and reminding the viewer of the sexual scene when Dorothy asked him if he liked the feel of her breast). At this point Orbison sings, 'Just before the dawn I awake and find you gone. I can't help it, I can't help it if I cry.' Frank asks his men to hold Jeffrey tight for him, and he begins to beat him as the song, at higher volume, wails, 'It only happens in dreams. Only in dreams.'

Thus, the pain Frank expresses in the scene at Pussy Heaven is explained when we hear the end of the song: it is the pain of abandonment, loss, powerlessness, dependency. This pain evokes Frank's rage, which is highly eroticized. Frank's desire, both heterosexual and homosexual, is inextricably fused with pre-Oedipal

25 For a discussion of the violence and shaming rituals evoked by male–male desire in film, see Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2–16. See also Kaleta, *David Lynch*, who argues that homosexual desire evokes Frank's disturbance and rage in this scene and the one with Ben (pp. 124–5).

rage and violence, which are aroused at the moment he feels abandoned by *both* a male and female intimate.[25] In both Freudian theory and in Frank's psychology, dependency is eroticized, and the rage it engenders eliminates female agency and male nurturance, while celebrating a (missing) phallic power; this is one aspect of what we have come erroneously to call the Oedipal. Stuck in the moment of narcissistic rage, Frank fragments and displays the gender, age (baby/daddy), and identity indeterminacies characteristic of self-disorder (a warning against the facile celebrations of indeterminacy that we find in some postmodern theories and theories of the pre-Oedipal). Phallic law rests not on a denial of fragmentation or castration but on a denial of dependency and loss, a denial of female agency and desire for a nurturant father: more specifically, it rests on a refusal to mourn early losses and parental disappointments. Thus are the failures of the Oedipal incomprehensible without understanding the failures of the pre-Oedipal: the way the Oedipal script plays out bears the marks not only of loss, as Lacan suggests, but of rage at dependency and abandonment, split off and projected onto the female although experienced in relation to both father and mother.

This is male trouble. After Jeffrey is beaten senseless by Frank, a candle glows, a hellish sound returns, the screen fades to black, and Jeffrey wakes, a man. Lynch, master of sound, immediately provides his association to what it means to be a man. Jeffrey wakes to a sound, then a sight, of hoses, the very sound/image that in the opening scene had accompanied his father's collapse into impotence. Dorothy is punished and figured as the abandoner, but the film's other secret is father abandonment, which Lynch reveals ragefully not just by making the fathers absent, but by making them impotent or evil.

When Jeffrey wakes up he knows all he needs to know about the mysteries of masculinity. He sits on his bed thinking. He sees Dorothy's mouth saying 'Hit me'. He cries. He sees himself hit her. He cries more. Then he sees an image of Donny's hat. He cries even more. He pictures the closed door at Pussy Heaven and hears Dorothy say, 'No, no Donny, mummy loves you': her attempt to reassure her son that she has not abandoned him. He sees himself hitting her again, and his crying continues. Why is Jeffrey crying? What, according to Lynch, do men want? It seems to me that both Frank and Jeffrey want to be Dorothy's baby. Dorothy's voice off in Pussy Heaven does not establish the power of the mother (which is Bundtzen's argument); the film, like the culture of which it is a part, like Freudian theory, denies this possibility. Rather, the offscene reunion of mother and son establishes the power of the son – he who is reassured that he has the mother's desire (indeed, Dorothy's husband is mysteriously absent in this scene). What is denied in this slippage from mother to son is female agency, that one depends on

a female whose desire is not just for the son, but is also elsewhere.

Donny's power is established via the recurring image of his hat, which, in Jeffrey's visual imagination, seems to evoke Jeffrey's sense of his own innocence before his detective work reveals to him the darker impulses of this vision of masculinity. Jeffrey is seen playing with the hat in the scene immediately following the one in which he hits Dorothy. After he hits her, they make love, and we hear animal sounds reminiscent of the sounds in *Elephant Man* that accompany the mother's rape by elephants. The sight and sound of hellfire recurs, the screen fades to black, and we next hear Dorothy say: 'I have your disease in me'. Then we hear child's music and see Jeffrey playing with the hat. When Dorothy hears the musical hat, she runs down the hall and quickly grabs it, holding it to her like a sacred object. She says: 'He used to make me laugh' (something we never see Dorothy do). In Lynch's world of dichotomies, of naivete and innocence vs sickness and horror, the male adult and his sexuality are diseased, and the child holds the power. At some point abandoned by mummy and daddy (if not actually abused by them, as in his other films – even here, Dorothy pushes him and hits him first), the trajectory of manhood shifts from innocence and power to degradation and impotence. Whether a result of parental abuse or of unmourned inevitable parental failures, Lynch dramatizes a narcissistic solution to narcissistic blows.

Jeffrey comes downstairs to breakfast, and when his aunt asks about his bruises, tells her he does not want to talk about it and, lightly, says that if she keeps asking she's going to get it. Masculinity is now inextricably linked with the threat of violence (and distinguished clearly from femininity – Aunt Barbara suggests that Jeffrey should talk about his problems, that marriages are saved by talking. Jeffrey has stopped talking. He no longer confides his knowledge to Sandy, protecting her from his harsh insights into the world and masculinity, making of her an object to his subject).

Jeffrey wants to turn the case over to the town fathers now, and bond with Sandy at the hop. But the town fathers are impotent, and Jeffrey is not allowed to escape the consequences of masculinity so easily: in the film's Oedipal moment, he has to kill Frank and repudiate a now not-so-sexy Dorothy. In the final scenes, however, the alternatives for Oedipal manhood become clear. With Frank gone, we return via Jeffrey's ear to the world of family life in the suburbs. Jeffrey's dad is fine, and he and Detective Williams, garden tool in hand, chatter on the lawn, while the 'girls' are inside either gossiping over tea or cooking. The robins have come, and even if the robin has a worm in its mouth, the music and everything else suggest that Jeffrey has joined the world of Sandy's dream, the world of the impotent fathers.

In these closing moments the too vibrant, too peaceful images of the opening, with the music of love and reconciliation, are repeated;

but this time they end with Dorothy smiling at her son in the park. Wearing his trademark hat of innocence and power, Donny runs to her in slow motion and she happily holds him. She then looks off in the distance and hears herself sing the final line of 'Blue Velvet': 'And I still can see blue velvet through my tears' (in the opening rendition by Bobby Vinton, the line had been cut off, keeping the pain in the song hidden until we first see it on Frank's face). Perhaps Dorothy is the only figure allowed to be in touch with both the world of innocence and the world of horror at the end. But the very splitting of the world in this way is a problem bound up with the psychology of the film.

Where I depart from Bundtzen is in her suggestion that Lynch finally allows Dorothy her desire. Although it could be argued that before she was violated by Frank, Dorothy must have had the kind of agency that allowed her not only to be a mother and wife but also a sexy singer in a nightclub, it was the sexy singing that led to the loss of her agency. The film's ending evokes Freud's own deconstruction of his Oedipal theory, the poignant moment of his essay, 'Femininity', where he sadly acknowledges that the Oedipal promise to the male actually does not quite work out: for while the adult male's desire is for his wife, her desire is for the penis, incarnated in her male child.[26] But this piece of theorizing, too, is a male fantasy: *the* pre-Oedipal male fantasy, which imagines a lost moment of plenitude in order to avoid acknowledging the child's dependency on a powerful female whose subjectivity cannot be reduced to the maternal. Dorothy, before Frank, was precisely the female subject that the dependent child/pre-Oedipal adult cannot tolerate. On Lynch's screen, however, the powerless, helpless Dorothy – Dorothy after Frank – predominates. The film must be read as incarnating rage against her agency, not against her lack.

26 Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 134: 'How often it happens, however, that it is only his son who obtains what he himself aspired to! One gets an impression that a man's love and a woman's are a phase apart psychologically.'

Thus, the masculine dichotomy drawn by Lynch is either rage and impotence or blandness and impotence, a vision that has certain resonances with the Reagan–Bush years, when bland smiles and homilies hid rageful acts of violence. In Lynch's films, these may be represented by different characters, as in *Blue Velvet*, or by the same character, such as Laura Palmer's father, Leland, in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. Jeffrey's insight into masculinity is precisely a vision of Leland Palmer, good bourgeois father on the surface, raging abuser beneath.

Where does the psychology of *Blue Velvet* meet the political reality of contemporary USA? I shall conclude by taking up the challenge posed by Jane Shattuc, the challenge for feminist theorists to begin to map the patriarchal dominant of our time. Shattuc is disturbed by the moral ambiguity in Lynch's work, which does not allow the viewer to make ethical determinations about the unprecedented level of violence against women in films such as *Blue Velvet* and

Twin Peaks. I agree with her that Freudian categories do not help to understand this rage. Discussing the mix of historical periods in the film, Shattuc writes:

> *Blue Velvet* extends this blurring of history to an image of generalized masculine rage which has no source. Why does Frank brutalize women? Frank's obsession appears to originate from a fragmented and contradictory Freudian problem – a drug-induced Oedipal fixation – that ultimately makes no sense.[27]

27 Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 78. Further, Shattuc notes how a scene of Frank crying is succeeded by a battle for male dominance, but she does not explore the link between the two scenes (p. 81).

As I have argued, Lynch's world does make psychological sense in the split world of pathological pre-Oedipal dynamics. The fact that Frank's narcissistic rage has become a staple of contemporary mainstream and avant-garde filmmaking suggests that these dynamics operate on the cultural as well as on the individual level.

US independent filmmaker Abel Ferrara's latest film within a film, *Dangerous Game* (1993), provides an interesting example of this phenomenon, because Ferrara does not hide what I have called the secret of male dependence and rage at female agency. For much of the film, we watch director Harvey Keitel try to get his male protagonist, James Russo, in touch with feelings of abandonment provoked by his wife's (Madonna) turn from him. Keitel tries to get Russo to show more pain, a pain that is the director's own, but what the audience largely sees is the violent abuse Russo plays out towards his wife as he gets in touch with that pain. While Keitel assures Madonna that her character has power, the power of her new spirituality, he directs her to submit to Russo's violence. Only at the point at which Russo threatens to kill her is she to try to stop him: which she does – ineffectually – by questioning his manliness. Ferrara hides few of his film techniques and clearly means for us to see filmmaking as the dangerous game, violent towards its actors, its audience, even towards the emotional life of the director. Nonetheless, what we see for much of the film is continuous and escalating violence towards the woman, a violence that the film implies is real, not just acted.

Shattuc challenges us to understand what this filmic rage at women tells us about contemporary gender relations. I have argued that Lynch presents a particular vision of male development, in which a powerful child, innocent and in full possession of the mother's desire, grows to bland impotence and/or rageful impotence. The secrets in the film are male dependence, female agency, the desire for a nurturant father. But another secret that remains hidden in *Blue Velvet* and in writings about it is the secret of recent history: Shattuc writes that none of the eighteen reviews of the film she read 'sought to explain the film's central sadomasochistic relationship between Dorothy and Frank in the context of contemporary sociopolitical circumstances'.[28] Lynch mixes images of the 1950s with images of the 1980s, one of the main attributes that impel critics to

28 Ibid., pp. 77–8.

call his work postmodern (by which they seem to mean 'confusing'). But a possible political interpretation arises from the fact that the 1950s and the 1980s mark the period of development of our real hero, David Lynch. *Blue Velvet* is thus a historicized parable of male development.

Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* is an attempt to understand how the patterns of childrearing in the 1950s led to a situation in which heterosexual men and women, by virtue of their self structure, could not fulfil each other's needs. Her story, located in suburban, middle-class USA, where Jeffrey Beaumont's story also takes place, features overinvolved mothers deprived of outlets for their desire other than their children, and largely absent fathers. The psychological consequences of pre-Oedipal development are different for the male and the female children of these families. Drawing on the work of Robert Stoller, Chodorow argues that because the primary caretaker of boys and girls is a woman, a woman becomes the first object of identification. Nurture, caretaking, emotion, dependence all become associated with females. Father absence prevents the boy from identifying with these attributes in a like other, which, as I have argued, leads to an Oedipal theory and reality that centres on competition and hostility rather than connection and care. The road to male gender identification involves disidentifying not only with the mother but with everything that has been associated with her. This, Chodorow argues, is the characteristic psychic constellation of the heterosexual middle-class white male who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Emmanuel Kaftal adds that the lack of a nurturant pre-Oedipal father, the projection of dependency and nurture onto the female, lead to misogynistic envy of women, rivalry and hostility towards men, and to driven, repeated enactments of (failed) separation via acts that require heroic isolation.[29] Thus, the psychic constellation involves a lack of fathering and the eroticization of dependency needs, as well as the expectation that mother has no other interest but her children. The pain caused by the absence of a nurturant father (the Sandman) is disavowed, and mother is blamed for all wounds.

As Fredric Jameson has noted, what is absent from nostalgia films like *Blue Velvet* is the 1960s (and, I would add, the 1970s).[30] What happened during the 1960s and 1970s that was so threatening to masculinity that the decades have become a secret? I would suggest that films such as *Blue Velvet* simultaneously reveal and hide the secret of white heterosexual masculinity in crisis. The crises come from many sources: they stir up the vulnerability, emotionality and dependency that phallic masculinity wishes away; the consequence is helpless rage. One such crisis was the women's movement, which has made it hard to continue to fantasize that a woman's desire is only for husband and child. Woman's desire is equally likely to be

29 See Emmanuel Kaftal, 'On intimacy between men', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1991), pp. 305–34. On a lighter note, Ann Murphy suggests that if women were writing the Psychiatric Diagnostic Manual, they would add a male disorder titled something like 'Excessive Autonomy Syndrome' (personal correspondence).

30 Fredric Jameson, 'Nostalgia for the present', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2 (1989), pp. 517–37.

elsewhere, in a career, in a woman's group, in other autonomous pursuits.

A second 'crisis' is the challenge to the dominance of heterosexuality by the gay and lesbian movement. Thus homosexual desire makes its appearance on screen, but also evokes rage and violence. Third is the challenge to the dominance of whiteness, first by the civil rights movement, then by Vietnam and other 'Third World' liberation struggles, and now by the demands of multiculturalism. While the only nonwhite actors in *Blue Velvet* are somewhat peripheral to the plot (Jeffrey's father's black employees, who clearly know how to run the store without help from the white master), one astute critic points out that one of Lynch's many dichotomies is the contrast between 'a blond, apple-pie-American sweetheart' and 'a dark, sick, European-accented one'.[31] The rage against the dark European might also reflect a fourth crisis, the decline of the USA as an economic power and the rise of countries like Germany, with the threat of a united Europe. The threat of a dependent USA unites symbolically with the threat of the displaced, dependent male to suggest that the current rage against women is historically, as well as psychologically, motivated.

There are many other variables contributing to the increased visibility of fractures in the fantasy of phallic wholeness. The economics of the 1980s interrupted the fantasy of male classlessness. In good economic times, men can bond as men and deny class differences. In bad times, when the rift between poor and rich becomes more palpable, lower-class and displaced middle-class males lose a group identity that gives them a sense of phallic power: they are all thereby made painfully aware of their place.

If the postmodern has something to do with threats to white heterosexual male hegemony, then perhaps the level of violence against women we see (not only on the screen but also in real life) is a reaction to postmodernity (in Massachusetts, a woman is killed by a partner or ex-partner about every nine days. Often, as in the scenario of *Dangerous Game*, these murders occur at the moment a chronically abused woman abandons the abuser. This has provided the clue to those who study domestic violence that male dependency is the underside of these displays of male violent power.[32]). In stirring up male trouble, these crises put men in the position of both abuser and abused, and evoke the defences of the fragmenting self: splitting, projection, insecure attachment and immense sensitivity to abandonment, and narcissistic rage against anything perceived as a less powerful other. Such rage is not the manifestation of an aggressive drive, but the response by narcissistically vulnerable psyches to perceived threats to security.[33]

Lynch's film enacts pre-Oedipal defences on the level of both content and form. Karen Jaehne, looking at the psychology of *Blue Velvet*, calls Frank and his men 'sadomasochists teetering between

31 Simon, 'Neat trick', p. 56.

32 See, for example, Virginia Goldner, 'Toward a critical relational theory of gender', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1991), pp. 249–76.

33 Stephen Mitchell, a prominent psychoanalyst of the relational school, reinterprets aggression in his most recent book, and concludes, 'If there is aggression, there is, by definition, threat'. *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 166.

childhood and manhood'. Criticizing Lynch as a binary thinker, she writes:

> What *Blue Velvet* effectively does is to scare us into a panic or cynicism over lost ideals. It should not make us think that the only alternative to naivete is humiliation into abuse, with the only solace the sound of a Sixties' song. Innocence is not lost; it is transformed. American dreams encounter their greatest challenge not in preserving innocence, but rather in maturing – an observation beyond Lynch at this point.[34]

34 Jaehne, 'Blue Velvet', p. 40.

One might include in this indictment most US cultural production and much US politics. Indeed, John Powers makes what I consider the same point as that Jaehne raised to the political level, when he argues that Lynch scares us into sticking to the safe side of lobotomized *bourgeoisement* by picturing the only alternative as horrific. Powers speaks of a breed of films he calls the New American Gothic, films that challenge the bland pap of most Hollywood offerings that 'flicker across the screen with the practiced, comforting banality of a presidential smile'. He says of Lynch's film:

> Such a dichotomy is typical. All the New American Gothic movies share a taste for extremes, but when it comes time to show anything in between, the credits begin to roll. *Blue Velvet* finds no mid-range of experience between Jeffrey's daylight world and Frank's murderous 'love letters' in the dark. . . . In fact, these films exude the Manichaean, middle-class paranoia that infects countless recent movies . . . all of which imply that once you leave bourgeois life, you're immediately prey to crime, madness, squalor, poverty.
>
> Now it would be wrong to criticize *Blue Velvet* and the others for not dramatizing the excluded middle, for not finding alternatives to the extremes of good and evil that give them their spark. Literary gothicism is distinguished by similar stylization; it goes with the territory. Nevertheless, one suspects that these films don't dramatize alternatives because they can't imagine alternatives.[35]

35 Powers, 'Bleak chic', p. 51.

Perhaps the patriarchal dominant is the psychology and politics of this split world, a world with no alternatives to black-and-white thinking because so much vulnerability is kept secret. As anxiety heightens, splitting intensifies. Lynch's psychology of male development mirrors the US's fantasy that it has fallen from a fifties innocence into a nineties violent nightmare. Such a fantasy results in political 'solutions' like the Gulf War, solutions that are as dangerous and aggressive as the kind of personal solutions Lynch shows.

A look at the imagery of contemporary male popular culture

suggests that those of Jeffrey Beaumont's generation do not feel overly mothered but rather feel either abused or abandoned by both their parents and by cultural authority figures. Lynch's films capture this psychological reality as well (for example, neither of Jeffrey's parents is involved with him and Donny is abandoned). These films suggest, however, that if we fail to mourn our losses on both the individual and the political level, we repeatedly enact narcissistic relations and solutions. The narcissistic nightmare in Lynch's parable of male development – the wish to dominate an omnipotent/impotent mother and merge with an omnipotent/impotent father – is symptomatic of an inability to mourn the losses of narcissistic blows. Lynch's alternative, equally narcissistic and disingenuous (and thoroughly American), is to claim the position of an innocent baby.

Lynch's films, focused so heavily on trauma and abuse, enact the dynamics of splitting on the level of both form and content. These dynamics, I would argue, are central to mapping a patriarchal dominant. The anxiety that Lynch is such a master at generating with images and sounds very much reflects the heightened anxieties experienced by many men at this historical moment. It is in part an anxiety about gender identity and gender roles, about threats to the traditional ways, that attributes such as dependency and autonomy have been split between the genders. Lynch captures the essence of the Reagan–Bush years in his vision of a world of robins and love facing off against a world that rages against female agency and violent or ineffective male authorities.

Blue Velvet, a parable of male development for our time, sheds light on some of the problems of contemporary feminist film criticism, particularly as the latter turns its attention to male trouble. Just as Freudian categories cannot explain the dynamics of *Blue Velvet* and other films that feature the interplay of impotence and rage, so they are inadequate to an understanding of male trouble. The Freudian Oedipal/pre-Oedipal is an instance of splitting that mirrors the kind of splits we see in Lynch's world, and it is hard to go beyond these splits if we remain in a Freudian framework. If aggression is a drive rather than a response to a threat to an endangered sense of self, if castration anxiety is bedrock, it is hard adequately to historicize increased violence against women. As Mary Ann Doane indicates in her book, *The Desire to Desire*, the danger of using Freudian and Lacanian categories to interpret gender relations in film is that film theory and psychoanalytic theory are built from the same phallic categories.[36] Freudian theory and feminist film criticism too often have kept the secret of male dependence and female agency by focusing their energy on such categories as originary fragmentation, castrated women, Oedipal dynamics, merger with the screen, and so on. Whether castrating or phallicizing the mother, the developmental theory offered not only by Lynch, but also by Freud and Lacan, describes and enacts a

36 Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

moment in the development not of men, but of narcissistic men. In order to understand the contemporary psychic and social worlds, different categories – those of self disorders, trauma and pre-Oedipal pathology – are necessary.